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ABSTRACT

This report offers answers to four basic questions about children's readiness for school: (1) What does being ready for school mean? (2) How can practitioners best identify and assess readiness? (3) How important is readiness? and (4) How do children who are ready get ready, and how do children who are not yet ready become ready? It is argued that readiness should be viewed as a continuum. Few children are completely ready or unready upon entering school. Because readiness is a combination of many factors, no single factor should be used to determine readiness. Assessment should involve readiness scores, classroom behavior, emotional development, and parental input, as well as the child variables of curiosity, determination, and motivation. Fairly simple readiness tests are available for use in assessing readiness. These include the Gesell Pre-school and School Readiness Tests and the Metropolitan Readiness Test. Readiness is important because children "overplaced" in educational settings may experience organismic strain, stress, and developmental difficulties. They may become reluctant learners. Parents play an important role in promoting their children's readiness by providing opportunities to explore new environments and develop vocabulary in an atmosphere rooted in love, fun, and the absence of anxiety. (RH)

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A RESEARCH REPORT ON

ESSENTIAL FACTORS GERMANE TO A CHILD'S READINESS FOR FIRST GRADE

Submitted to

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Essential Factors Germane to a Child's Readiness for First Grade

Nationwide these words are heard, "Is this child ready for first grade?" The question has been asked by parents, teachers, principals, study teams, and even by the Center for Education Statistics as they held a planning conference to address a directive from U.S. Secretary of Education, William J. Bennett. Secretary Bennett instructed the Center for Education Statistics to undertake feasibility studies of various approaches to assess first grade readiness on a national level (Brown & Faupel, 1987).

Beginnings are important in almost any endeavor. They are especially important in school, states Pamela Selden, (1987), a first grade teacher in Washington, D.C. Selden asks several questions: What does being ready for school mean? How can we best identify and assess who is and who is not ready for school? How important is readiness? How do children who are ready get ready and how do children who are not yet ready become so? This report will address these four questions.

What does being ready for school mean?

A definition of school readiness depends upon the perspective of the person giving the definition. To clarify the term school readiness as opposed to reading readiness, Jim Grant (1986), a nationally known consultant on the topic of school readiness/ developmental placement, says school readiness is a composite picture of a child developmentally, not an I.Q. or reading readiness test. Carll & Richard (1977) define school readiness as the ability to cope with school environment: physically, socially, and emotionally, as well as academically without undue stress - and to sustain in that environment. In the remainder of this report, the term readiness will be used to mean school/first grade readiness.

Selden (1987) discusses some guidelines she uses to discuss readiness with parents and colleagues. (1) Is the child able to look outwards? (2) Is the child ready to be a group member? (3) Is the child able and open to trust others? (4) Does the child demonstrate the beginnings of responsibility for self and belongings? (5) Does the chilld have an adequate attention span? (6) Is the child able to communicate and use language? (7) Does the child show age appropriate large and small motor development, and auditory discrimination: visual, and memory? (8) Does the child hold the concept that the printed text is

spoken language written down (9) is the child available for learning?

Because of the role of belief systems and educational contexts in determining readiness, Anderson (1987) thinks the problem of defining and assessing readiness is both complex and difficult. Selden agrees that assessment of readiness in young children is a complex undertaking due in large measure to the incredible variety of developmental levels and diversity found among an average group of six-year-olds. Three early childhood specialists agree that readiness is not completely within the child. David Elkind (1987), President of the National Association for the Education of Young Children says readiness is not something which exists in the child, but rather the degree of match between the child's modes of learning and those required by the curriculum. Anderson (1987) & Shipman (1987) agree with Elkind that we cannot simply ask what abilities the child needs upon entering school, but we must ask the question specific to context, suggesting that different levels or types of readiness may be needed by children to succeed in different schools. A stool with three legs is the way Baron & Baron (1983) describe school readiness. Leg #1 is the mind - experiences and

activities that allow the child's mind to stretch and grow - to listen, to learn, to compare, to categorize, to perceive, to reason. Leg # 2 is the body - a sound body allows the child to perform at his best. Stimulating the body also stimulates the mind. Leg # 3 is the heart - it involves relations with people - including trust, consideration, and decency. It is how a child comes to feel about himself and his abilities. An open heart usually leads to an open mind. The legs all need one another to stand up.

Baron & Baron also think being ready for school involves many things and that it is important for parents to prepare their children in several areas. Early childhood specialists Ames,Gillespie, & Streff (1985); Bjorklund, D. & B. (1988); and Grant (1986); agree that a child's readiness level is a combination of his/her physical, emotional/social, and mental/intellectual development. Questions they ask are:

<u>physical development</u>- Can he hold a pencil in a good two or three-finger grasp? Can he operate scissors? Does she draw easily? Can she copy a circle counterclockwise, a triangle, a divided rectangle with angled lines crossing the center line? Elkind (1987) says fundamental and manipulative learning is a necessary prerequisite to symbolic and derived

learning. Can he stand on one foot to the count of 8? Can she throw a ball overhand? Does he tire quickly? Can she hop and jump? Is his height and weight at least 47, and/or hers 45? Can he tie his shoelaces; zip or button his jacket

emotional/social development - Can he concentrate despite distractions? Can she share? Does he seem as mature as other children his age? Is she able to separate from a parent easily? Can he communicate with someone he has just met? Will he be overwhelmed in the lunchroom? Does he have trouble sitting still longer than two minutes? Can she sustain a function? Can she sit still? How long is his attention span? Can he attend a task to completion?

mental/intellectual development - Does she know the letters out of context? Can she make rhymes? Does he have a concept of written words being spoken language? Does he realize that long sounding words have more letters? Does she see the differences in shapes? What problem-solving skills are evident? Does he actually understand the use of numbers? Can he follow directions? This is only a sampling of the situations a first grader faces daily. The demands on these youngsters is great.

How can we best identify and assess who is and who is not ready?

An assessment of school readiness implies that we intend to collect meaningful information as to whether or not children are ready for school (that is, dichotomous information) or the extent to which children are ready for school (continuous information) (Anderson 1987). Grant (1986) suggests parents trust their instincts, obtain advice from educators, read literature, have child take a readiness test, and make certain that both parents share the same viewpoint.

One of the most often debated issues of readiness is the child's age as he/she enters school.

Davis, Trimble, and Vincent (Shepard & Smith, 1986) found that children who were fully six years old when they entered first grade were 9 percentile points ahead of children who were only five when they started first grade.

Dr. Frances L. Ilg & Dr. Louise Bates Ames hold the opinion (Grant 1986) that in determining whether a child is ready for school, almost all our schools ignore the most significant measure of all: the child"s developmental age. Carll & Richard (1977) define developmental age as the age at which a child is behaving as a total organism - a functioning age. A child's developmental age is where he sustains - where he is "grounded".

Among six-year-old children you will notice a very wide range in height, weight, personality, and temperment. The same variation exists in the rate at which these children develop and mature. Yet we expect that every six-year-old will be capable of mastering the same curriculum as every other six-year-old. A child who has not reached the developmental age of six is at risk and may fail first grade no matter how smart he is (Grant 1986). A mother bird, says Grant, seems to know that if she pushes her babies out of the nest too early, those birds will never learn to soar. He firmly believes that human parents have the same good instincts about their babies. He says to keep the child in the nest until he is ready - then watch him fly.

Before children enter school, a fairly simple readiness test can be administered which provides valuable information about the child's developmental level (Grant 1986). This level can then be translated into grade placement which will give your child the best chance for success in school. Grant(1986) says that the best known and most widely used readiness tests are the Gesell Pre-school and School Readiness Tests developed by Arnold Gesell. Many school districts also use the Metropolitan Readiness Test as a readiness indicator.

Critics of screening instruments have often cited the lack of precise evaluation measures, but in statistical terms, there is bound to be a large standard error of measurement when working with young children whose changing physical, mental, and emotional conditions tend to produce widely discrepant results for the same test given at different times (Judy, 1986). The best school readiness tests, says Grant are based on extensive research and long and careful observation of children at various ages.

How important is readiness?

Bjorklund.& Bjorklund (1988) state that first grade is rigorous. There is a set curriculum to be followed, and standards of achievement must be demonstrated by students before they can be promoted to second grade. They also discuss the sequence of textbooks that are used that require children to achieve certain skills and knowledge before they are able to go on to the next textbook

Louise Bates Ames, of the Gesell Institute in New Haven, CT says (Bjorklund & Bjorklund, 1988) that early schooling is getting "infinitely more difficult for children." In many cases, kindergarten today is taught the way first grade was twenty years ago.". Bjorklund & Bjorklund mention that first grade teachers must consider the wide range of intellectual, social,

and emotional abilities possessed by her six- year-olds and still teach them the skills dictated by the state legislature and the local schoolboard.

There is a big difference between kindergarten and first grade. (Baron, Baron, & MacDonald, 1983). They go on to say that there is more structure and less free time, the teachers do less mothering, all children are expected to begin reading, printing, and math, and first grade expects that certain levels will be met by all students at the end of the year.

Carll & Richard (1977) define overplacement as being in over one's head - being in a school situation which is causing strain to the organism. They also state that overplacement can inhibit a child's social growth, physical well-being, emotional stability, or his academic learning. Another point is made - the overplaced child is frustrated and under a great deal of stress. Marzollo (1988) agrees with this by saying that when children are presented with expectations that they can't live up to, they worry. Then an atmosphere of failure sets in that makes children even more nervous and turns them into unnaturally reluctant learners. Carll & Richard (1977) make another direct statement about the fact that when we place a child in a situation for which he is not ready, we inhibit his

chances of becoming the whole person he was meant to be.

How do children who are ready get ready and how do children who are not yet ready become so?

This report does not deal with an I.Q. factor. The information mentioned here relates to all children regardless of natural intelligence.

Whatever we learn, we learn by relating new ideas to what we have already experienced in our lives, and then we reformulate our old beliefs in light of the new ideas (Buckley, 1987).

Parents are the first and most important influence in a child's educational life (Baron,Baron, & MacDonald, 1988; Bloom,1988; Brown, 1986; and Finn, 1986). It is extremely important for mothers and fathers to make sure that their children frequently explore new environments. When youngsters have new experiences, they think new thoughts and search for new words to explain what they encounter. As a result, they develop larger vocabularies and improve their overall use of language, and become more knowledgeable (Brown,1986). Baron & Baron (1983) think that parents can help build a strong reading-readiness foundation for a child at home - with love, fun, and without anxiety. Chester E. Finn, Jr.(1986) found that the best way for parents to help their children become better

readers is to read to them--even when they are very young. Children benefit most from reading aloud when they discuss stories, learn to identify letters and words, and talk about the meaning of words. Finn also found that parents are their children's first and most influential teachers. What parents do to help their children learn is more important to academic success than how well-off the family is. Rudolph & Cohen (Doremus, 1986) urge that children be allowed to learn first from life, then from books.

Conclusion

It is most important to see readiness as a continuum. There are few children who are completely ready or unready upon entering school. The readiness is a combination of many ingredients - no single factor should be used to determine readiness. We need to look carefully at readiness test scores, observe the child in the classroom, consider emotional development and parental imput. Far more difficult to measure, we need to seriously consider the qualities of curiosity, determination, and motivation that all children bring to school. It is the interaction of these various competencies that accounts for what I call readiness (Selden, 1987).

At whatever age the child starts school, his beginning school years are critical for what he learns

and will continue to learn. When educational programs for children (three to six) are developed, it must be realized that these young human beings need certain early developmental experiences before they can take advantage of later experiences. A child needs to follow a pattern of growth natural for him in order to realize his fullest potential as a person (Law,Moffitt, Moore,Overfield,and Starks,1965-66)

Doremus (1986) believes hothouse forcing may make bright cyclamens bloom for winter holidays, but it's not a wise move in educating children.

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